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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001268

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA ARRESTS ARMENIANS FOR CROSSING SEPARATIST
BORDERS

REF: A) YEREVAN 920 B) YEREVAN 938 C) TBILISI 2424 D)
YEREVAN 838

Classified By: CDA A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Since early August, numerous Armenian citizens have been arrested in Georgia for transiting the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia without Georgian permission, which is illegal under Georgian law. Armenian media claim that 100 have been arrested. Armenian diplomats have confirmed only 25, but believe the true number could be in the hundreds. Armenian officials expressed frustration over the development, and predict this will have a chilling effect on the burgeoning Armenian tourist trade on Georgia's Black Sea coast. The closing of the Kazbegi-Verkhniy Lars border checkpoint (refs A and B), the only legal land border crossing, has prompted many Armenians to use the unofficial crossing points in the separatist territories. Thousands of Armenian citizens have transited or visited the breakaway regions at some point, making them vulnerable to this apparent new enforcement push from Georgian authorities checking passports for Abkhaz and South Ossetian entry/exit stamps. END SUMMARY.

ARRESTS BASED ON MID-90s LAW

2. (C) According to Vardan Hakobyan, director of the Armenian MFA's CIS desk, the arrests are based on a mid-1990s Georgian immigration law that requires travelers to obtain Georgian permission before entering Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Hakobyan put us in touch with Gagik Karapetyan, a counselor at the Armenian Embassy in Tbilisi, for more details. Karapetyan told us his Embassy learned of the arrests when an Armenian citizen called from detention in the Black Sea port of Poti in early August. Karapetyan told us Georgian officials made the arrests after noticing South Ossetian and Abkhaz stamps in the Armenians' passports. The circumstances under which the officials found the stamps are unclear.

3. (C) Karapetyan accused the GOG of flagrantly violating its consular agreement with Armenia, which requires it to notify the GOAM of citizen arrests within three days. Armenian citizens rarely contact their Embassy in Georgia for help, Karapetyan said. Thus, though he said he is aware of only about 25 arrests, he said the actual figure is probably much higher than the 100 arrests cited by news outlets. Karapetyan said he knew of four people still in prison, and said other had been released to obtain money to pay fines or bail, but that the GOG retained their passports. He said if convicted, the Armenians could be sentenced to four or five years' imprisonment, or be ordered to pay a fine of 2,000 lari (approximately USD 1,100).

4. (C) Karapetyan said Armenians routinely crossed the Russian borders with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in order to visit relatives or to drive truck routes. He said that, up until now, the authorities had rarely, if ever, enforced the law. Karapetyan estimated that 50,000 Armenians living both in southern Russia and Armenia had Abkhaz and/or South Ossetian stamps in their passports. He likened the situation to that between Israel and Arab countries, and said that Armenia would not consider issuing its citizens additional passports to facilitate travel to the separatist regions. "What kind of relations can we have with Georgia if we need to change our citizens' passports becQI"}/Rr!Faqinconsistent policy regarding the South Ossetian crossing, noting that the GOG permitted travel through that border when

snow forced the closure of the Verkhniy Lars crossing -- the only official border checkpoint between Russia and Georgia.

15. (C) Though Karapetyan was clearly frustrated with the GOG, Hakobyan stopped short of fully blaming either Russia or Georgia for the problem. Contrary to Karapetyan's claims, he noted without cynicism that the Georgian government was working with the GOAM to get the Armenian citizens released, as they had not realized they were breaking the law. As for the Russians, Hakobyan said, "Russia didn't arrest the people, but we wouldn't have this problem if they hadn't closed the border." The border was reopened temporarily September 3, but is now closed again (ref C). MFA spokesman Vladimir Karapetyan told the press the GOAM anticipates a speedy resolution to the issue.

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OFFICIALS PREDICT LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON BLACK SEA TOURISM

16. (C) Hakobyan and Karapetyan both predicted that the arrests would affect the rising number of Armenian tourists who visit Georgia's Black Sea coast, primarily Batumi and Kobuleti, popular seaside resorts in the autonomous region of Adjara. In June, Armenia and Georgia reopened the passenger rail link between Yerevan and Batumi for the first time in 14 years (ref D). The Armenian media published many reports this summer, optimistically trumpeting the projected figures and predicting increased goodwill and better relations between the two countries as a result. (NOTE: News outlets quoted the Adjara prime minister saying that 35,000 Armenians had visited Adjara for vacation as of September 5. Officials predict the number will rise to 45,000 by the end of September. Last summer, 20,000 Armenians vacationed in Adjara. END NOTE.) The press reported last week that the Armenian government plans to open a consulate in Batumi next year.

EFFECTS ON ECONOMY STILL UNKNOWN

17. (C) The effects of the border closure on Armenia's economy are difficult to measure, and few GOAM officials have made public mention of the damage to Armenia's economy. Russia is Armenia's main market for fresh agricultural produce, which was generally trucked across Georgia to the Verkhniy Lars border crossing. Now the only legal route available is through the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti and then via ferry to the Russian port of Novorossiysk, adding considerably to the cost of transport and to the time it takes to get products to market.
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